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Shuttle disaster's impact on SDI foreseen as minor

By Tom Diaz
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It's too early to tell what effect Tuesday's space shuttle disaster will have on President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, according to the Pentagon.

But independent observers believe the immediate impact will be minor, and that the Pentagon, if necessary, will be able to "bump" other shuttle loads to keep the SDI program moving.

Defense officials confirmed yesterday that the SDI program has been given the "highest priority" in the latest version of "Defense Guidance," a highly classified document that sets out the nation's military priorities.

But the shuttle disaster could have a serious effect on other military space projects, including putting weather, navigation and spy satellites into orbit.

"The loss of one of the four orbiters affects all users of the space transportation system, including the Defense Department," said Pentagon spokesman Robert Sims.

The explosion of the shuttle will have a serious impact on the military space program. The Defense Department yesterday was assessing what its effect would be on future launches of spy, navigation and other satellites.

"It [the Tuesday explosion] clearly has a serious impact on defense programs. But we are making every effort to carry out the defense programs and missions that are assigned," Mr. Sims said.

Four military shuttle launches had been planned this year, starting in July. Because of the disaster, Mr. Sims said, "we cannot know how long there will be a delay and therefore we are at the preliminary stage of assessing schedule mission requirements."

He said the Pentagon's intention is to carry out the planned launches,

"but at the moment we do not have a full assessment." The first two military shuttle flights were made last year — in January and October.

Space expert John Pike of the American Federation of Scientists said one military program that may be affected is the secret KH-11 spy satellite. He said a replacement for the orbiting KH-11 exploded with its rocket on the launch pad last year.

Mr. Pike said there may not be another KH-11 available and its successor — the KH-12 — is too large for the existing rocket booster. It could therefore only be placed in space by the shuttle. The Pentagon declined comment.

Officially, SDI officials refused to speculate on the shuttle accident's impact.

"It's really too early to tell," Lt. Col. Lee T. DeLorme, spokesman for the Pentagon's Strategic Defense Initiative Office, said yesterday. "We don't know what the cause of the accident was, what is necessary to

make corrections and when the shuttle will fly again."

"Once we know all of those things, then we will know what the effect might be," he said.

The \$27 billion ballistic missile defense research program was not scheduled to start making major use of the space shuttle until next fiscal year, Col. DeLorme said.

"Our arrangements with NASA envisioned two half-bay shuttle missions per year beginning in fiscal year 1987," he said. "That's when we would become a big user of the shuttle."

Col. DeLorme declined to describe the fiscal year 1987 experiments except to say that "the early one involves the Space Lab and doing some pointing and tracking experiments. Beyond that I can't say."

Several independent observers said they think the shuttle accident won't have much impact on SDI in the near future, although two SDI-related experiments were set for the next military flight of the shuttle, scheduled for July.

"I don't think the program's near term tests will be significantly affected," said George A. Keyworth II,

"The political impact might be significant."

who was Mr. Reagan's science adviser until last month. "It depends exactly on what the impact [of the disaster] will be on the shuttle launch schedule."

The loss of one of the shuttle vehicles may "require some re-establishing of priorities," Mr. Keyworth said. "But I really don't think the overall SDI program is going to be significantly impacted."

Most sources said the shuttle accident would begin to have an impact on the SDI program if the shuttles remain grounded for a long period of time, but that even that could be made up for by "bumping."

But some said a delay in shuttle operations could have a political effect on SDI by depriving the program of public relations benefits that might have flowed from successful experiments.

"The political impact might be significant," said Richard Bueneke Jr., editor of "Military Space," a bi-weekly publication that closely follows the SDI program. "If you're Ronald Reagan... you might want to have some more things to show people before you head back to the ranch."

Mr. Pike said several SDI experiments scheduled for the shuttle would have given the program "some nice flashy PR."

Mr. Bueneke said that, according to unofficial reports, one of the experiments scheduled for fiscal year 1987 was a laser tracking, or "target designator" experiment, and the other an acquisition and pointing, "telescope type thing" experiment in cooperation with a German team.